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[redacted]

STATINTL

MY LIFE IN THE CIA

HONORABLE MEN

by William Colby
with Peter Forbath

STATINTL

In 1956, while still in Italy, I received a cable from CIA headquarters in Washington proposing that I transfer from the Rome station to South Asia, where, operating under private cover, I would act as the CIA's adviser to a very prominent political leader.

In deference to Agency discipline, I replied that of course I would go if headquarters insisted, but that I thought it made little sense to pull me out of Rome before the 1958 Italian elections, the outcome of which was the main reason I had come there in the first place.

After the elections, however, I reactivated the idea and applied for a transfer to the Far East. The Agency had an appropriate opening—as deputy chief of station—in Saigon.

And so it was that I began more than a decade and a half of intense involvement in what was to be one of the most traumatic and tragic experiences in modern American history, the Vietnam War.

When I arrived in Saigon with the family on Tet of 1959, the war had not yet begun.

Less than five years had passed since the fall of Dienbienphu. The Geneva Agreement of July 1954, formalizing the French defeat in Indochina, had divided the country between the rival governments of Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam and Ngo Dinh Diem in the south, had arranged for an exchange of populations—about 90,000 southern Communists went north and some 900,000 northerners, largely but not exclusively Catholics, went south—and had set 1956 as the date for elections for the reunification of the country.

To be sure, at that time, both sides had made arrangements for a resumption of war. The Communists had left a stay-behind net in the south, consisting of perhaps 5,000 to 10,000 cadre and guerrillas, and had put into training as future guerrilla leaders the southerners who had gone north.

And the CIA's Ed Lansdale, coming fresh from helping Magsaysay of the Philippines put down the Communist Hukbalahap insurrection there, had tried to set up a similar anti-Ho underground network in the north. But neither amounted to very much.

Saigon's Weakness

In 1954, indisputably, the Saigon government was extremely weak and precarious. Diem's power and authority in those days didn't extend much farther than the gates of the Presidential Palace. Beyond, he was challenged on every side by a host of dissident and powerful factions, quite apart from the Communists.

The armed religious sects—the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao—were in a virtual constant state of revolt, and the Binh Xuyen, best described as a gang of bandits, controlled the Saigon police and freely defied Diem. His only appeal lay in his nationalism, which had led him to exile rather than accept French colonial rule.

Not surprisingly, with so much going against him, hardly anyone gave him much chance of surviving. And yet, Diem pulled it off, by taking on his enemies one by one. He organized a referendum to depose the Emperor Bao Dai, and establish a Vietnamese republic with himself as President.

And finally he arranged elections for a South Vietnamese National Assembly and formally rejected the 1956 elections for the unification of the country, because they obviously would be won by the more populated Communist-controlled north.

Through all of this, Diem unquestionably benefited from American aid, as well as from the political support of President Eisenhower.

Then, too, there was CIA's backing: Ed Lansdale proffered political advice (for which he was pilloried by Graham Greene in *The Quiet American*) and the Saigon CIA station helped to train Diem's bodyguards and provided him with a direct channel to the Dulles brothers, John Foster at State and Allen at the Agency, in Washington. But for all of this the main accomplishment was truly Diem's.

By 1958 not only had he put down his opponents, he was well launched on an extensive development program for South Vietnam. But despite this success, there were in Diem's approach flaws that would prove critical in time.

Diem functioned as a Mandarin

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administrator, a benevolent dictator. The vacuum that this produced in Saigon's political life was partially filled by noisy Saigon opposition groups and by mass rallies organized regularly by government officials to impress the Palace. But to a far greater degree it was filled by the machinations attributed to Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, Nhu's wife, and the secret services serving them.

In the countryside, more worrisomely, the vacuum was filled by the Communist stay-behind networks. During 1957 and 1958 there was a gradual rise in their activity—agitprop teams lectured hamlet residents in the evening, guerrilla squads attacked villages and executed isolated government officials, and recruiters took young men into the forests for political and guerrilla training.

This, then, was the situation when we arrived in Saigon in February 1959, a situation so quiet and uneventful that I could bring my family with me without worry. We moved into a lovely former colonial villa, located on a handsome tree-lined boulevard near the Presidential Palace. We joined the Cercle Sportif, and the family would gather there weekly for lunch at poolside.

Because of my long-term interest and experience in politics and political action, I devoted most of my time to cultivating my contacts with the Saigon government and especially the triumvirate that

Madame Nhu, Diem's powerful sister-in-law, evoked U.S. hostility against the Diem regime when she visited here in 1963.

dominated it: Diem himself, his brother and *éminence grise*, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and his wife, the controversial dragon lady, Madame Nhu.

Madame Nhu had, just a few months before my arrival, forced through the legislature a new "Family Code." After I had met Nhu, and she learned that I was a lawyer, she asked me to help her with this task.

So, on a series of afternoons I went to the Nhus' wing of the Palace to sit with her and work through the code. Intelligent, sharp both in mind and manner, and brilliantly groomed from lacquered hair to bejeweled fingers, she exhibited the imperious manner of the empress that she in fact was in the Vietnamese power structure.

She also showed a very real human side—her pride in her four children and her hope for the betterment of the lot of the women of Vietnam. But she had a fatal flaw, a complete lack of tact, and this led her to make the combative and outrageous statements that were to help bring down her husband, his brother and her in later years.

My first private encounter with Nhu himself, her husband, proved every bit as fascinating. Nhu was thinner than his brother, delicately handsome, and very soft-spoken.

What ensued was a rambling and revealing four-hour discussion in French, touching on virtually everything from his first contacts with the CIA during pre-Dienbienphu days, to his belief in the need for an ideological base for all politics.

Nhu then actually held no official post in the Saigon government, and his only title was that of counselor to his brother. But he was unquestionably the second-most-powerful person in the regime. Yet he was utterly unlike Diem.

Nhu was the intellectual, interested in theoretical concepts and political forces. And, unlike his brother, he recognized that the future of a viable non-Communist Vietnam depended on building a political base for it.

Diem's pet project of 1959, the "agroville," got off to what seemed a promising start. Agricultural "cities" were established on land taken from large landowners under a land-reform program. But the

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project proved to have an Achilles' heel: the garden plots around the houses widely separated them from each other, making it impossible to defend against infiltrators.

On January 27, 1960, the Communists attacked an army regimental headquarters near the Cambodian border. What later came to be known as the Ho Chi Minh trail was opened, and the some 90,000 southern Communists who had gone north in 1954 began reinfiltrating into South Vietnam—along with arms and supplies and some North Vietnamese as well.

The stay-behind net was activated. The numbers and effectiveness of the guerrilla raids, assassinations, terrorist strikes and kidnappings escalated.

Another of Diem's troubles emerged at just about the same time. A group of leading civilian political figures formed a "Committee for Progress and Liberty" and on April 30 issued a petition that charged that Diem's regime was copying Communist dictatorial methods. The effect of this petition was to start a political war within Saigon to go along with and complicate the guerrilla war in the countryside.

Tragic Debate

The immediate consequence of both these wars, especially from the CIA's point of view, was twofold. First, the Diem government came under increasingly severe strain and pressure, both from within and without. And second, the official United States community, both in Washington and in Saigon, fell to quarreling bitterly about what to do to meet the challenge, starting the long, bloody and tragic debate over the American role in the Vietnam war.

The United States military took a predictable stand. It viewed the escalation of the Viet Cong insurgency as the outbreak of a war. To this end, MAAG stepped up its efforts to re-form the South Vietnam Army in line with the American model.

"Madame Nhu... had a fatal flaw, a complete lack of tact."

But the embassy objected. The State Department officers in Saigon looked at the problem as one of building political confidence in the Diem regime.

The CIA station pretty much stayed out of these disputes. But listening to the heated arguments, I could not help but begin to formulate my own ideas of how the insurgency should be met and countered. I soon found that I didn't agree with either the military or the diplomats.

In the first place, it seemed obvious to me that the Communist strategy was anything but a traditional war. Vo Nguyen Giap, Hanoi's military genius, had written of how he had fought the "people's war" in North Vietnam.

The real way to contest the Communists, it seemed to me, would be to mobilize, organize and involve the villagers.

In June 1960 I got a chance to try to implement some of my ideas on this score. My chief was transferred to a new assignment and I was named to succeed him as CIA chief of station.

The Viet Cong were making gains everywhere. To make matters worse, a coup attempt was launched against Diem, led by a disaffected parachute colonel who believed that Diem wasn't fighting the Communists aggressively enough.

The Colby family got their baptism of fire on that occasion. Bullets whined through our windows, and I barricaded Barbara and the children in a hall on the top floor.

For several hours, nearly a full day really, it wasn't clear which way the coup would go, and the United States embassy took a hands-off stance. CIA officers, however, were in touch with all the factions involved, and our radio net kept us up on every minute's move.

At one point Nhu sent me a message, asking that I attend a conference between the contestants, but by the time it took place Diem had rallied troops from outside Saigon.

Most of the politicians were arrested, but one showed up a day later on the doorstep of the CIA officer who had been with him during the coup, pleading for help to avoid Diem's retribution. CIA's loyalty to its sources was at stake.

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so I had him hidden for several days and later arranged a courier flight abroad onto which he was loaded in a mail sack.

The coup attempt, despite its quick defeat, had real effects. The embassy's neutrality showed Diem and Nhu that they could not absolutely rely on the full support of the Americans. Nevertheless, they believed that the CIA and I were sympathetic to their position.

It was in this atmosphere, then, that I decided to experiment with an idea we in the CIA had about how that revolution should be combated.

Combating the Revolution

There was Gilbert Layton, a gruff, straightforward paramilitary specialist who had run across a young man I will call Ben (because he is presently with the CIA), who at that time was a member of the International Voluntary Service, a precursor of the Peace Corps, which, I must emphasize, had absolutely no connection with the CIA.

Ben was working with the Rhade tribe of Montagnards in the Highland Plateau. He came up with a scheme by which the Rhade villages could defend themselves against the Communists. They asked if the CIA could get the villagers weapons so that they would not have to depend on the Vietnamese Army units in the area, which were never there when needed. The CIA certainly could help.

I believed it essential that the CIA's help be put in a political framework. I came up with the idea of combining the self-defense concept with economic and social improvement for the villages.

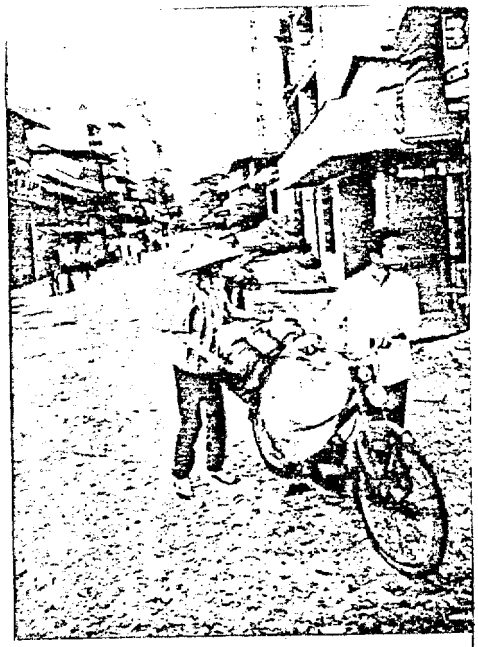
In my weekly sessions with Nhu I outlined my plan for an experiment in the small Montagnard community of Buon Enao. Once Nhu approved, and assured me that he would obtain Diem's approval as well, I instructed Ben to sit down and talk with the village elders at Buon Enao.

They cautiously agreed, and Ben and a small group of Vietnamese and American Special Forces personnel moved to the village and began to train the local young men and women in a program of defense and development.

The log houses were dusted with DDT; a small stock of carbines was delivered, and the young men were trained to use them on patrol and in defense positions; some of the girls were taught simple first aid; and an emergency radio contact was set up with a nearby military center to pass the word if an attack occurred.

It worked. The villagers enthusiastically joined in the various activities, and a sense of confidence grew.

CIA's experiment spread with such rapidity that I decided to give it a name, Citizens' Irregular Defense Groups. But as it expanded—30,000 weapons were eventually distributed—it raised qualms in military circles about its lack of coordination with the regular military forces.



Refugees from the 1967 Tet offensive. A military failure, it was a "psychological victory" for the Communists, says Colby.

Nhu became more and more enthusiastic over the political revolution he could see as the result of the program. The seed of the "Strategic Hamlet" campaign had been planted.

As press and Washington attention to Vietnam grew, a steady stream of visitors from the United States came to inspect our efforts. And in January 1961 a special one arrived, to whom I paid particular attention.

John F. Kennedy had, of course, just been elected President. The visitor he sent out to Vietnam to

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help him in this was the "Ugly American," Ed Lansdale, who had returned to the Pentagon after his service in the CIA.

I had never met him. But I knew from the lore of the Far East Division of his brilliant work with Magsaysay in the Philippines and in Vietnam during the anarchy of 1954.

Our first session together was a shambles. He obviously thought he was being subjected to some form of shell game and said hardly a word during the whole evening. But he did go out into the countryside to take a look at what we were doing, and he did talk to Vietnamese.

And so he did learn that the station's activities were both welcome and effective and came away with the conclusion that I hoped he would: that the conflict was essentially a guerrilla war and that the military approach was not the answer.

Lansdale's message did get through to the new administration. In April I was called to Washington. The President approved the program, which mercifully had almost none of the State Department's favorite rhetoric about "reforms."

Something else was going on in Washington during my visit. Just a few days before, the CIA-organized invasion of the Bay of Pigs had ended in total disaster, and the President and the Agency were reeling from the shock of it.

Two other visitors from Washington arrived in Saigon in October 1961. They came to assess for President Kennedy the situation on the ground.

The senior of these visitors was General Maxwell D. Taylor. The second was Walt Rostow, and they brought with them a radically new view about the CIA.

Taylor had conducted the official post-mortem on the Bay of Pigs for Kennedy, and one of his most important conclusions about the fiasco was that the CIA was not staffed nor did it have the necessary logistics backup to carry out large and difficult paramilitary operations. And Vietnam obviously presented just such a large-scale operation; it was, in Taylor's analysis, beyond CIA's capabilities and thus ought to be given over to the Pentagon.

Brief Meeting

Unfortunately, before Taylor arrived, I had to attend a gathering of the area's station chiefs in the Philippines. By the time I got back to Saigon, Taylor and Rostow were just about ready to depart for the United States, and I had only a few harassed minutes with them.

Soon thereafter the first American helicopter units arrived to provide "combat support," and a series of other steps were taken to increase the military side of the effort. But all decisions were not Washington's to make.

With Diem's approval, Nhu began to develop his plan for a nationwide campaign of "strategic hamlets," as his political answer to the Communists.

After a momentary shock over this unilateral Vietnamese initiative, the American offical community fell in behind the program. The program as a whole began to gather momentum and reports came in of Communist concern that it was succeeding.

By early 1962, the prospects for a favorable outcome looked so promising that when Desmond FitzGerald requested that I return to Washington to become his deputy in the Far East Division, I asked that he leave me in Vietnam for one more year. But he insisted.

And then, in the early summer we packed up the family, leaving Vietnam and heartened by the comment of that prominent Australian Communist journalist and apologist for North Korea and North Vietnam, Wilfred G. Burchett, who conceded that "1962 must be largely credited to Saigon."

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After a delightful halfway-round-the-world holiday with the family, I returned to Washington from Vietnam in the summer of 1962 to discover a radically changed atmosphere both within and without the CIA.

Until the Bay of Pigs—indeed, ever since the glory days of the OSS in World War II—the Agency had enjoyed a reputation with the public at large not a whit less than golden.

***Times's* Suppression**

There is perhaps no better illustration of this than in the case of the Bay of Pigs itself. *The New York Times* actually had come upon information about the CIA's preparations for the Cuban invasion before the event. But President Kennedy persuaded the editors that running the story would jeopardize the national security, and they suppressed it.

But all that changed—or, more accurately, began to change—with the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Suddenly the Agency appeared to be, not an elite corps of slick, daring James Bond operatives, but rather a collection of bunglers.

After a discreet interval to spare personal feelings, Kennedy purged the CIA's top leadership, replacing Allen Dulles with John McCone as Director, and Richard Bissell with Richard Helms as Deputy Director for Plans. McCone was, I have long

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felt, the best director the CIA ever had.

But the more immediate and direct effect on me of these changes came from Dick Helms's appointment to head the Directorate of Plans. He set about stressing the need to develop more professional espionage and counterespionage operations, and to tighten the discipline in the covert-action arena. It wasn't an overnight job.

After all, the covert-action culture had grown by leaps and bounds during the preceding ten years and, by the time of the Bay of Pigs, about half the total CIA budget was being spent on political, propaganda and paramilitary operations. But by the time I returned to Washington, the corridor gossip was that large-scale covert-action operations were now things of the past.

Once I had a chance to familiarize myself with the Washington scene, I found a peculiar contradiction in this picture. There was one particular area where the Kennedy brothers turned especially to the CIA: to carry out an intense program against the Castro regime that had humiliated the United States in the Bay of Pigs.

Soon after, Bissell was being "chewed out in the Cabinet Room by both the President and the Attorney General" for not doing enough against Cuba. And in November 1961 Kennedy authorized Operation Mongoose, "to help Cuba overthrow the Communist regime," bringing in that veteran covert-action hand, Ed Lansdale, as its chief of operations and assigning Robert Kennedy and Maxwell Taylor to oversee it personally.

While Lansdale's wildly imaginative initial 30-odd tasks—ranging from simple intelligence and propaganda operations to sabotage of Cuban factories and rail lines—were cut back to intelligence operations alone, a year later authorization for sabotage was given to a new special CIA Cuban Task Force. And pressure for operations of this sort was intensified by the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962.

The definitive intelligence finally came from the CIA's U-2 and its photographs, which on October 15 showed offensive missiles in the process of erection. One of the most important consequences of the missile crisis was on the morale of the Agency: it soared. The CIA had done just the sort of thing it was supposed to do.

Left: Buddhist demonstrations in Saigon in 1963 led Washington to seriously consider overthrowing President Diem. *Below:* An American GI in Vietnam. LBJ had sent in 550,000 combat troops, but the war had to be won at village level, says Colby.

But from my point of view, personally, the most significant consequence of the Cuban Missile Crisis was that it exacerbated the Kennedys' fury over Castro and intensified their determination to use the CIA and its covert-action capability "to get rid of him," with all the ambiguity the phrase includes.

And this campaign included renewed attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, which had started in 1960 and were sporadically prosecuted from 1961 to 1963, and which, although I had nothing to do with them at the time and indeed didn't even know about them, I would find myself trying to explain to the press, the public and Congress fifteen years later.

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Just when I had returned to Washington, the Geneva Agreements on Laos (July 1962) were signed. Under the accord, fifteen nations agreed to withdraw all their military forces, cease their paramilitary assistance to the three contending factions in Laos, and recognize neutralist Souvanna Phouma as the leader.

All the nations followed the agreed script, except one: North

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Vietnam. According to CIA's intelligence reports, there had been some 7,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos at the time.

Gradually our weekly intelligence reports became more ominous. The North Vietnamese troops were not only still there, they were moving out to expand the area they and their Pathet Lao puppets controlled.

Now Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, had made it forcefully clear to the CIA as well as the military that he (and the President) insisted on full compliance with America's commitment to abstain from providing any further assistance in Laos. So when I brought him the first intelligence reports revealing that North Vietnamese troops were still in the country, he insisted that we hold to our position.

Each week, my arguments became more forceful, reflecting the intense cables I was receiving from the two CIA officers who were still up in the hills. It was plain to them that the North Vietnamese were out to crush the Meo tribesmen by military force, with the Meo unable to defend themselves for want of resupplies of ammunition. At last Harriman approved the secret dispatch of a minimum quantity of ammunition.

The "secret war" escalated. The North Vietnamese forces gradually grew to the 70,000 we would count in 1972, and the CIA was authorized to revive, supply, and increase the tribal units it had started to build before the Geneva Accords. Moreover, it was authorized to send its harassing parties deep into areas "controlled" by the North Vietnamese to locate its depots, ambush its trucks, mine its roads and mortar its outposts.

Tribal Patrols

The tribal patrols, who knew the country and were fighting against its invader, were airlifted to battle in Air America's helicopters and put down in isolated clearings or villages. They reported the exact enemy dispositions through the radio nets set up and supplied by the CIA and were supplied (and their families supported) through CIA channels that bypassed corrupt Vientiane middlemen to bring funds and weapons direct to them in the mountains.

Throughout this "secret war," I insisted on the importance of the political element. CIA's officers in Laos were instructed to use their political as well as their paramilitary skills to ensure that the forces we were supporting understood clearly that they were being helped as a part of Laos.

A radio station was set up with CIA help, and transistors were distributed throughout the mountains to broadcast the appeal of the "Union of the Lao Races," to unify the different tribal elements and the lowland Lao. And the king was induced to pay a ceremonial visit to the tribal force headquarters to show the symbolic unity of his kingdom.

Despite the scope of this CIA effort, numbering some 36,000 armed forces throughout Laos, the CIA station conducting it never rose above two or three hundred in strength. They were supported, of course, by Air America.

Moreover, the CIA officers were under strict instructions not to engage in combat, which they did not, despite their unhappiness. The policy worked to limit CIA casualties during this long war to only about five killed. What's more, the CIA's budget for the operation measured in the tens of millions instead of billions of dollars, and was less than the military aid that went to the valley-bound Royal Lao Army.

And the result: the battle lines at the end of ten years of fighting, against an enemy whose strength increased from 7,000 to 70,000 in that time, were approximately where they were at the outset.

To be sure, the end was not victory, but neither was it the defeat that the Communists had sought. (But when the Communist forces resumed military and subversive pressure *after* the 1973 agreement, the CIA was *not* directed to respond, and Laos is under Communist rule today.)

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The battle was fought without drafting American youth for service in the Lao mountains.

The CIA tried to conceal all this from public knowledge and, since it really couldn't, it inspired the growth of myths and legends that bore little resemblance to the facts, and the charge that the CIA was conducting a "secret war."

In accordance with CIA's normal practice, the small group of Congressmen in the committees, who were charged with its supervision, were kept informed of its activities in Laos.

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The date was May 8, 1963. In Hue, the ancient imperial capital in central Vietnam, a demonstration by Buddhists against the Saigon government had flared into a riot, and nine people had been killed by South Vietnamese troops. The Hue riot led to what I still consider the worst mistake of the Vietnam war: the American-sponsored overthrow of Diem.

In the year since I had left Saigon, the war had continued to grow in intensity, but I still was pretty optimistic about the prospect. What I regarded as the most important aspect of the war, the strategic-hamlet program, had by all accounts taken the initiative from the Communists in the countryside and was going full blast.

A start had clearly been made in the right direction in Vietnam. But forceful leadership, hard work and American support began to disappear as a result of the May 8 Buddhist riot and deaths.

On June 11, a single event dramatized the issue. A Buddhist press spokesman alerted American journalists that "something important" would happen that morning. And it did. A Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, lit a match after his fellows had poured gasoline over his head and body as he sat at an intersection in downtown Saigon, and the horrifying photograph of his immolation shocked the world.

Madame Nhu's callous remark that this and later self-immolations were nothing more than fanatics "barbequing" themselves intensified the revulsion against the Diem government.

As a result, President Kennedy found himself in the impossible situation of supporting what appeared to be a brutal government.

I personally agreed with Diem and Nhu that the Buddhists were raising an essentially false issue of religious discrimination.

The Buddhist Issue

But as the Buddhist protests escalated, the State Department's view of the situation came into ascendancy. It was pressed most fervently by Averell Harriman, now Undersecretary; by Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs; and by Michael Forrestal, son of the former Secretary of Defense. They fervently believed that the war could not be won unless the Saigon government was reformed.

In mid-August, a conference was set up in Honolulu at the CINCPAC (Commander-in-Chief Pacific) headquarters to provide the new Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, a final briefing. I was sent along to ensure that he got a full picture of CIA's activities and capabilities.

But barely had the conference got underway when the news tickers reported that South Vietnamese troops had conducted a raid on Xa Loi, the principal Buddhist pagoda in Saigon, and then on others in other cities as well.

"Lodge had taken State's message as a direct order to prepare for a coup."

Because of the CIA's secrecy and its long-time close relations with Nhu and Diem, the immediate question was raised in many minds whether the Agency might even have had something to do with the raids.

On August 24, 1963, one of the most important messages in the Vietnam war was drafted and sent by the United States government. It identified Nhu as the devil behind the pagoda raids.

That evening, I was alerted that a most important cable had gone to Saigon from the State Department. I went to the CIA Operations Center to read it, and immediately saw its significance. I learned that the message had been drafted by Harriman and Hilsman in the State Department, but that it had been "cleared with Hyannisport," where President Kennedy was spending the weekend.

Lodge had taken State's message as a direct order to prepare for a coup against Diem and had

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directed the CIA Saigon station to canvass its contacts and develop a plan for one.

But a policy swing as radical as this one, from American support of Diem to an attempt to overthrow him, required time to translate into an actual conspiracy.

The station's frantic efforts to make contacts with the Vietnamese military likely to carry out a coup came to the Palace's attention.

In the midst of all this, I discovered how the CIA probably got into the revolting (and, I might add, feckless) business of trying to assassinate Fidel Castro.

In a serious discussion with two high-ranking, non-CIA American officials with whom I often discussed CIA activities for policy approval, I was told quite directly, in a tone somewhere between sarcastic and cynical, that if the United States had a really proper intelligence service we would not be going through so much agony trying to decide how to deal with Nhu.

Ominous Implication

The implication was clear: these officials were suggesting that he should have been disposed of by the CIA long before this.

As I would report in agonizing detail to the Congress years later, some people in CIA took similar expressions of official hostility to a foreign leader as a suggestion, consent or even authority, to mount operations aimed at assassinating Castro.

In fact the later investigations disclosed that the word *assassination* itself did appear in some official papers of the period, even though John McCone objected to it and apparently was not aware of what was being done with respect to Castro.

But McCone did react forcefully to a suggestion by General Big Minh around this time that assassination of Diem's brothers, Nhu and Can, might be one way to conduct a coup. At McCone's direction I cabled the Saigon station to abstain from stimulating, approving or supporting any such action or in any way condoning it and thereby engaging our responsibility for it.

To all this "pressure" Diem and Nhu reacted negatively; it succeeded in getting them to dig in their heels only that much more. Madame Nhu came to the United States and appeared on a number of TV talk shows, where she made successively more outrageous remarks and evoked even greater American hostility toward the Diem regime.

On November 1, Admiral Harry Felt visited Saigon and made a ritual call on Diem, with Lodge accompanying him. At the end of the meeting, Diem asked for a private word with Lodge and made what turned out to be a final plea for understanding from the Americans. He conceded that he had perhaps been too inflexible and that he was ready to try to accommodate the Americans by making reforms.

But there was one thing he couldn't do: get rid of Nhu. And he asked that Lodge consult with Lansdale and Colby about how much he needed his brother's counsel, as we both knew him. But the cable with this information was sent at routine speed, and by the time it reached Washington, it was too late.

Robert W. Komer, head of the CORDS pacification program, with LBJ. Colby says this program was the most successful.

The news of the coup arrived in Washington at about 2 A.M., November 1, and the CIA duty officer at Langley phoned me at home to come in and read the traffic.

I was not surprised: the pressure had risen so high in the previous weeks that some action was certainly to be expected, and we had received several indications that the generals were moving in this direction. President Kennedy had held a National Security Council meeting on October 29 to review the situation.

But now the die was cast; a

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major assault on the regime was underway. Later in the day, the President called an NSC meeting to assess the situation, and McCone had me do a briefing on the geography of Saigon, the disposition of the troops around it and the indications we had received as to how many were involved in the action.

I described these; but, on the basis of my experience with the 1960 coup attempt, I pointed out that the Presidential Guard would be loyal and that the key question was what the reaction of the units outside Saigon would be, and in particular that of an armored unit to the northwest of the city.

In Saigon, Diem and Nhu looked at the situation in the same way and spent hours on the telephone trying to rally support from commanders outside the Saigon area. When they realized they could not, they fled the Palace, later surrendered and were murdered by one of Big Minh's aides.

After spending most of that night in the CIA operations center, I went home to pick up a clean shirt before going to McCone's house to brief him. After briefing McCone, we rode down to the White House in his limousine, and I confessed to him that their deaths had hit me personally.

I had known and respected them both, one of very few Americans who did, especially as far as Nhu was concerned. But there was little time for sentiment; I quickly had to go and brief the President and the NSC about how the coup had been carried out and who seemed to be in charge in Saigon.

At the end of the meeting, McCone took me into the Oval Office, where he told the President that he was sending me immediately to Saigon to assess the situation and asked the President's approval. Kennedy looked drawn, apparently disturbed over Diem's death and anxious to find some way out of the morass that Vietnam now presented.

On the long flight to Saigon the next day, I wondered about the reception I would get from the generals and from Lodge. But both welcomed me.

The generals looked on me as a friend of Vietnam rather than just of the Diem regime and were rapidly convinced by a series of briefings I organized that the CIA could help them as much as it had helped Diem and Nhu.

Even Big Minh was friendly on the surface, despite my private qualms that he had neither the force nor the wisdom to lead the country or the other generals.

The Communists had scored substantial gains during the chaotic summer and fall, and now they put in an extra effort to capitalize on the paralysis that followed the coup and death of Diem.

To add to my pessimism, I saw little that the CIA could do to help. For November 1 marked not only the date of the coup in Saigon, but the final effective date for the implementation of another crucial event as well: Operation Switchback, the application of Taylor's post-Bay of Pigs recommendations under which CIA's large paramilitary operations were turned over to the Defense Department.

It soon became clear that the military wanted to do its own thing, and neither wanted nor listened to the CIA's political ideas of how to fight the war.

Kennedy's Assassination

But on Friday, November 22, all our problems were pushed into the background by a greater tragedy: President Kennedy's assassination in Dallas. I, of course, had no inkling then of the impact it would have on the CIA, forcing it to defend itself against paranoid conspiracy theories that it had a role in the assassination. The intense investigations of later years showed that it had no such role.

The fact of the matter is that the CIA could not have had a better friend in a President than John F. Kennedy. He understood the Agency and used it effectively. It is, of course, pointless to speculate on what Kennedy might have done in Vietnam had he lived. But I am convinced that he would, at the very least, have recognized the futility of a massive military buildup

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there as the way to fight a guerrilla war.

Unarguably, Lyndon Johnson inherited a mess in Vietnam, and one not of his making. For he had made clear, whenever he could, that he believed that we would be better off with than without Diem. His judgment proved correct, as Big Minh's junta proved weak.

Johnson also found the situation in Vietnam's countryside a lot worse than had been realized. The six-month political crisis in Saigon had taken its toll, the Communists had exploited it, and Washington awoke to the fact that the strategic-hamlet program had ceased working.

All agreed that the strategic-hamlet concept of building security at the local level should be revived and prosecuted.

On January 30, 1964, General Nguyen Khanh conducted a bloodless coup to displace Big Minh and his junta. Khanh certainly had weaknesses too, and he proved unable to dominate the situation. A series of coups and coup attempts followed, until the Vietnamese military formed an Armed Forces Council under Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky to try to establish some stability in government.

* * *

After one of the many meetings I attended at the White House, I stopped McGeorge Bundy outside the Situation Room and told him plaintively that we must get our attention and our programs back to the real contest at the village level, and build up from there instead of endlessly debating where to bomb North Vietnam.

He replied that I might be right in my approach, but that he thought the structure of the American government would never permit it to be applied. But the result was the Vietnam war as we now know it.

The CIA station in Vietnam worked hard to improve intelligence on the enemy in the countryside, giving priority to the Viet Cong political apparatus rather than the Communist military units, which the American and Vietnamese army commands concentrated on.

Viet Cong Infrastructure

We coined the word *infrastructure* to describe the secret Communist political network in South Vietnam and its "political order of battle"—including the young men for training and assignment to main force units, mining roads, and dropping grenades in the morning markets to demonstrate their power and the inability of the government to protect the people.

The CIA sponsored and built a national interrogation center in Saigon under the auspices of the Vietnamese Central Intelligence Organization and trained Vietnamese in the right techniques to use in it.

This training certainly did *not* include torture, which is morally impermissible and produces bad intelligence. There were certainly cases of torture in Vietnam, both by Vietnamese and by Americans, but just as certainly the CIA used its influence and its training to stop it.

As the situation in Vietnam deteriorated, the CIA station kept a sharp eye out for activities that might shore up the government's position in the provinces. And it soon gained permission to reenter the paramilitary field.

What the CIA's politically sensitive officers were on the lookout for was a program that had local roots rather than one that had to be imposed by Saigon fiat. So when Peer De Silva returned from a trip up the coast and reported his discovery of an interesting project near Qui Nhon run by the local authorities, I included it in my next visit out to Vietnam.

The project was the brainchild of a local Vietnamese officer named Nguyen Be and it consisted of a team of local young men, armed for their self-protection, but engaged primarily in mobilizing the village population for self-defense against Communist forces and in a cooperative venture to refrigerate their fish catch so that it could be sent to distant and lucrative markets.

De Silva had already sold the idea to the ambassador. Since it needed a name to fit the American programing machinery, we called it "People's Action Teams."

A national training center was set up at the beach resort of Vung Tau, where thousands of recruits, flown there by Air America, were taught that their role was primarily political, that their weapons were only for their own self-defense and that their success would be measured by the reaction of the vil-

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lagers, not by shooting the enemy.

We took a step of symbolic significance when we rejected the idea of a uniform of any sort for the teams. But the CIA got into the clothing business anyway by supplying each team member two pair of the traditional Vietnamese black pajamas, to demonstrate that he worked with the villagers, not for the Saigon government.

The program was so successful that the Vietnamese government, now headed by Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, adopted "revolutionary development" as its slogan. What's more, a Ministry of Revolutionary Development was added to the Vietnamese government to be CIA's counterpart in the management of the program, which grew to number some 40,000 cadre men.

When Lodge returned for his second tour as ambassador in August 1965, he became a passionate advocate of pacification—analogizing the CIA-supported People's Action Teams to American "precinct workers"—and brought Lansdale along as his pacification adviser.

The "Other War"

But the most important enthusiasm came from the highest level—from President Johnson himself. He demanded results in what he called the "other war," the one to improve the lot of the people of Vietnam.

The major change, in atmosphere, in organization, and in priority came from Robert W. Komer in March 1966, when Johnson assigned him as a special presidential assistant to energize the "other war" in Vietnam.

He understood the importance of the war at the village level, and he was fearless and tireless in browbeating the bureaucracy to do what was needed.

He obtained authority over American military support to the Vietnamese territorial forces and had them armed with American M-16 rifles to convince them that they could stand up to the Communist AK-47s after several years of an inferiority complex.

He integrated, rather than coordinated, the military and the civilian contribution to the war in the villages. Since everything in Vietnam had to have an acronym he named the new hybrid CORDS.

By the fall of 1967, then, it looked as though McGeorge Bundy might have been wrong after all, that the structure of the American government *could* be adjusted to meet the need to fight a people's war.

* * *

Richard Helms was now the Director of Central Intelligence. He was sworn in at the White House in June 1966, before many of his proud professional colleagues, including me. He was the first insider to get the top Agency post since Dulles.

In late 1967, when Helms had been DCI for over a year, he called me into his office, this time to suggest that I take over our Soviet and East European Division. I accepted Helms's offer gladly, bought a Russian primer and started a series of briefings.

But before I got to the most sensitive briefings, Helms called me into his office one afternoon. He had just come from the regular "Tuesday lunch" of the principal advisers with President Johnson. The President had turned to Helms at the lunch and out of the blue had said that Komer wanted that fellow Colby to go out to Vietnam to be his deputy as head of CORDS.

So I left the CIA—really. I took leave without pay, so my name would remain on the Agency roll, allowing me to come back some day.

Helms and I arranged that I go to Saigon on March 1. I broke my ankle ice-skating on the C. & O. Canal and shed the cast only the day before I departed. But something more serious occurred before my departure: the Tet offensive in Vietnam.

Propaganda Victory

It now is clear that the Tet offensive was not a Communist military success in Vietnam; but it is equally clear that it was indeed a Communist propaganda victory in the United States. It was, in part, due to the lack of understanding of the Vietnamese by the Americans on short tours there, unfamiliar with the language and applying American psychological standards. And it was a result, too, of the impact of modern journalistic techniques on the American people.

At long last Washington decided that United States military forces were not the answer to the Vietnamese war. And out of this decision came a series of crucial steps: Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential campaign, the beginning of the withdrawal of American forces in Vietnam, the change of focus from action by Americans to

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responsibility of South Vietnamese, and—with direct impact on me—the rise to first priority of the Vietnamese pacification program supported by CORDS.

Even before I departed for Saigon, on a snowy March 1, I told Barbara and my friends that the first thing I'd do in my new job would be to try to get weapons into the hands of the Vietnamese villagers so they could participate in their own defense. The race now would be between Vietnam's ability to defend itself and the rising American revulsion against the war.

But the first order of business upon my arrival, both for me and CORDS, was dealing with the aftermath of the Tet offensive.

So my first few months were given over to working for Komer on "Operation Recovery"—rebuilding towns, distributing food and materials, repairing bridges, reestablishing electrical systems and restarting all the other elements of people's lives.

Both to see how this program was progressing and as a briefing for my new duties (which included ducking mortar and rocket attacks), I traveled widely throughout the war-torn country.

The idea of arming the population sounded like madness to many Vietnamese and Americans alike.

I replied that the Communists didn't need our weapons since they had plenty of better AK-47s of their own. As for the question whether or not armed villagers would make an effective fighting force against the Communists, my answer was that wasn't the real object of the exercise; it was rather to enlist the population in the war.

As Komer and I discussed the CORDS program in the early summer, we agreed that Operation Recovery had done much of its job, even despite a Communist attempt to repeat the Tet assault in May. It was time, then, for the government to take the initiative and counterattack. And that strategy should be pacification—that is, organizing the countryside to participate in a campaign for security and development.

As a step toward promoting our strategy, Komer asked me to prepare a briefing for the September MACV Commanders Conference. I urged the need for us to work with the Vietnamese government to revive village government in the countryside.

One member of the audience listened to me with close attention and obvious understanding. He tapped his cigar thoughtfully and thanked me for the briefing—and then gave Komer his approval to go ahead and develop the proposal in depth with President Thieu. He was Creighton W. Abrams, who had just succeeded Westmoreland as the commander of America's military forces in Vietnam, and consequently Komer's boss.

In the middle of the surge of activity to launch the Accelerated Pacification Campaign on November 1, to give it three full months to show its effect by Tet, Komer was nominated as our new ambassador to Turkey.

Richard Helms, then Director of Central Intelligence, allowed Colby to temporarily leave the CIA in order to join CORDS.

A few days thereafter President Johnson gave me the personal rank of ambassador as director of CORDS. As the three-month campaign gained momentum, we turned some of our attention to the next step: the full-year pacification-and-development program that would follow it. And here I had the chance to try out my idea that political development from the ground up was really the central part of winning a people's war.

So, to the other elements of the pacification program I added a series of goals to strengthen local

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government, including holding elections in all possible villages and hamlets, giving authority to the village council over the local Popular Force unit (instead of having it report to the military district command), and launching a national training program for village and hamlet leaders to be conducted at the CIA-supported training center at Vung Tau, where my old friend Nguyen Be was still director.

But the program that perhaps had the greatest impact was a simple one—giving funds to the elected village leaders to carry out local development programs.

The over-all theme remained the one which Clay McManaway, the imaginative AID planning officer for CORDS, and I developed and which President Thieu quickly adopted: Self-Defense, Self-Government, and Self-Development. It was a theme applicable not only to local communities but to all of Vietnam as a nation, and it fitted precisely into the new Nixon Doctrine and its application in Vietnamization.

* * *

Of all the individual programs that made up CORDS, the one that has received the most attention and publicity is Phoenix, the operation to identify and root out the secret Communist apparatus within South Vietnam, the so-called Viet Cong Infrastructure, or VCI.

It is the program that has been most closely identified with me, a fact that I have never chosen to contest, because I have no qualms about accepting responsibility for its activities. But it is also a program that has been equally closely identified with the CIA, adding further to the reputation for secret skulduggery under which the Agency labors to this day. On both scores, that is wrong and unfair.

In July 1968, President Thieu issued a decree, which I helped to draft, establishing a series of Phoenix committees at the national, regional, provincial and even district level, and which set goals on how many of the VCI should be captured, induced to rally to the government under the amnesty program, or put out of action by military or police force.

We knew there was a VCI, but we could not be said to know very much about it. We knew that it was big—the best estimates putting it at well over 70,000—and we knew that it was active, since we saw the assassinations of village chiefs and local officials that it perpetrated, the mines it buried in the roads to blast the busloads of women bringing their produce to early morning markets, the taxes and young men it collected from isolated hamlets, the agit-prop sessions it conducted in remote villages.

Need for Accuracy

We also knew that the struggle against it would not be successful if we just blindly struck out. Thus, our first step was to make sure that the intelligence we gathered on the VCI was accurate.

Suspects were assigned to one of three categories: "A" for leaders and formal party members, "B" for holders of other responsible jobs—cadre—and "C" for rank-and-file members and followers. And the decision was taken that those in the "C" category should be ignored.

We were getting more—and more accurate—reports from inside VCI provincial committees and regional party headquarters from brave Vietnamese holding high ranks in such groups. They had been first identified by people who knew them, then recruited by our intelligence officers.

"The theme remained Self-Defense, Self-Government, and Self-Development."

The object of Phoenix, of course, was not merely to collect an academic treatise on the VCI but to contribute to the fight against it. Here another error is prevalent about Phoenix. Phoenix in fact had no forces of its own, thus it never conducted operations itself against the VCI.

The information it assembled and analyzed was turned over to the services that had the forces, authority and responsibility for such operations.

The top VCI cadre in a village, for example, might be arrested by the police; a key VCI leader's family might be approached by an amnesty team urging them to convince him to surrender to the government; a provincial VCI committee's guerrilla headquarters might be chosen as the target for encirclement and attack by the province's Regional Force battalion.

But didn't Phoenix do some-

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thing more? Didn't it, in fact, undertake to organize and supervise an assassination campaign in its attempt to destroy the Viet Cong Infrastructure and in the process wind up murdering some 20,000 people, many of them innocents? That is a charge that has been hurled at Phoenix—and at me—repeatedly in recent years. And the short answer to it is: No.

20,000 Dead

To some degree, I am responsible for that 20,000 figure gaining popular currency. At a 1971 Congressional committee hearing, at which I was asked to testify on Phoenix, I reported that under the program from 1968 to 1971 some 17,000 had chosen amnesty and some 20,000 had been killed.

But the word was "killed," not "assassinated," and I went on to clarify that the vast percentage of these—85 percent—were killed in combat actions with Vietnamese and American military and paramilitary troops and only about 12 percent by police or other security forces.

I specifically denied that Phoenix was a program to assassinate VCI and pointed to the clear 1969 directive I had issued on this point.

As in the Italian political campaign, I found both Phoenix's ends and our means well within moral limits. We took honest steps to prevent and replace immoral practices, and if our efforts were not totally successful, that did not mean we wouldn't keep trying.

Almost every week I invited one of the resident American newsmen to accompany me on one of my overnight trips in the field to see the results of CORDS' pacification program. Thus, these newsmen heard of our problems as well as of our successes; they rode up canals that had been under enemy control a few months before; they drove with the morning market traffic over roads no longer blocked by mines. But only a few ever wrote an account of what our program was doing.

One explained the problem by saying, "There is nothing very dramatic going on to write about." I answered that surely he must see that the life of the Vietnamese woman in the village we had visited was "dramatically" different from what it had been a year before, when she had huddled in a refugee camp, fearing that mortar attacks would drive her and her family back to her village to provide food, concealment and recruits for the enemy.

Now, she had "returned to the village" under the refugee program, was protected by a Territorial Force unit with her son in a self-defense group, had voted for the village council, had participated in a village discussion that had led to the decision to spend its development funds on a bridge across the canal to give her easier access to the local market, and her husband had received title to the land they worked and had made a start in planting the new miracle rice.

But these "dramatic" changes apparently could not be appreciated by the American newspaper reader and TV viewer. They were just not "dramatic" enough to compete with the sights and sounds of Vietnam as a military contest.

It was clear that the pacification program was succeeding. Increasingly, I traveled by road or canal, and less by helicopter; often my overnight stays in the field were pleasant evenings in rural communities rather than in tightly buttoned-up defensive outposts.

My primary interest still was focused on political growth from the bottom up, and Thieu agreed to my proposal to expand the election process from the village level up to the provincial level by holding elections for Provincial Councils.

I now began to think ahead about solutions not only for the country's rural problems but about those that could move Vietnam toward a permanent political system. I suggested that an American-style *party* be developed.

Thieu was interested in the idea, but he was still too dependent on

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his military structure to abandon or antagonize it.

So, while I dabbled slightly in political action, I put my real effort into making "community defense and local development" (as we began to call it) work. By the end of 1970, the strategy I had set of concentrating on the Delta, assigning John Paul Vann there, was proving to be successful.

But the real test of the success of the pacification program came long after I left: in the 1972 and 1975 Communist offensives. In 1972 it proved that we had won the guerrilla war, when the attacks took place only where the Communist regular military forces, with their tanks, artillery and rockets, were active. Elsewhere there was practically no guerrilla activity whatsoever—a sharp contrast to Tet 1968, four years before.

Ironic Asymmetry

In an ironic asymmetry, the Communists initiated the war against Diem in the late 1950s as a people's war and the Americans and the Vietnamese initially responded to it with a conventional military one; in the end the Thieu government was fighting a successful people's war, but lost to a military assault. The Presidential Palace in Saigon was not entered by a barefoot guerrilla but by a North Vietnamese tank with an enormous cannon.

Robert Kennedy was reported to have once said that there were enough mistakes made in Vietnam for all concerned to have had a share. Certainly the final fall of Saigon cannot be ascribed to any simple or single reason; each of the tragic errors that characterized the long travail there contributed to the final outcome.

Kennedy's vacillation between supporting Diem against the subversion from the North and repudiating Diem's authoritarian Mandarinism; Johnson and McNamara's certainty that Vietnam would respond to the weight of American military pressure; Nixon and Kissinger's formula of a ceasefire and agreement brought about by American bombs—none of these took into account the determination of the Vietnamese, Southern as well as Northern, to make their own decisions and fight each other to decide what sort of life Vietnam should lead.

The Congressional constriction of the military-aid pipeline in the winter of 1974 signaled the Thieu government's inevitable end as plainly as Kennedy's cutoff of the commercial-import program in 1963 signaled Diem's. The tactical errors of the final days, of course, contributed to Saigon's fall, but I believe the root cause to have been the Congressional signal of sharply reduced aid, with its inevitable effect in loss of morale and panic.

And at the heart of this problem is the fact that the answer must satisfy the American public, not merely the closed circles of government officials, however sincere and committed they may be. After all, the policies of the American government are in the end directed by the will of the people, and any program contrary to that will is sooner or later rejected and repudiated. This was a lesson I learned in Vietnam. ■

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President Kennedy talks to Nguyen Dinh Thuan, Diem's chief minister. JFK ordered the coup against Diem, says Colby.

CIA director Richard Helms shakes hands with Diem before the coup. Lodge, General Taylor and McNamara look on.

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After Diem's death, a series of coups ended in a government headed by Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu (above).

American troops in combat. Colby, who fought the "secret war" in Laos, says American troops in Vietnam hurt our effort.

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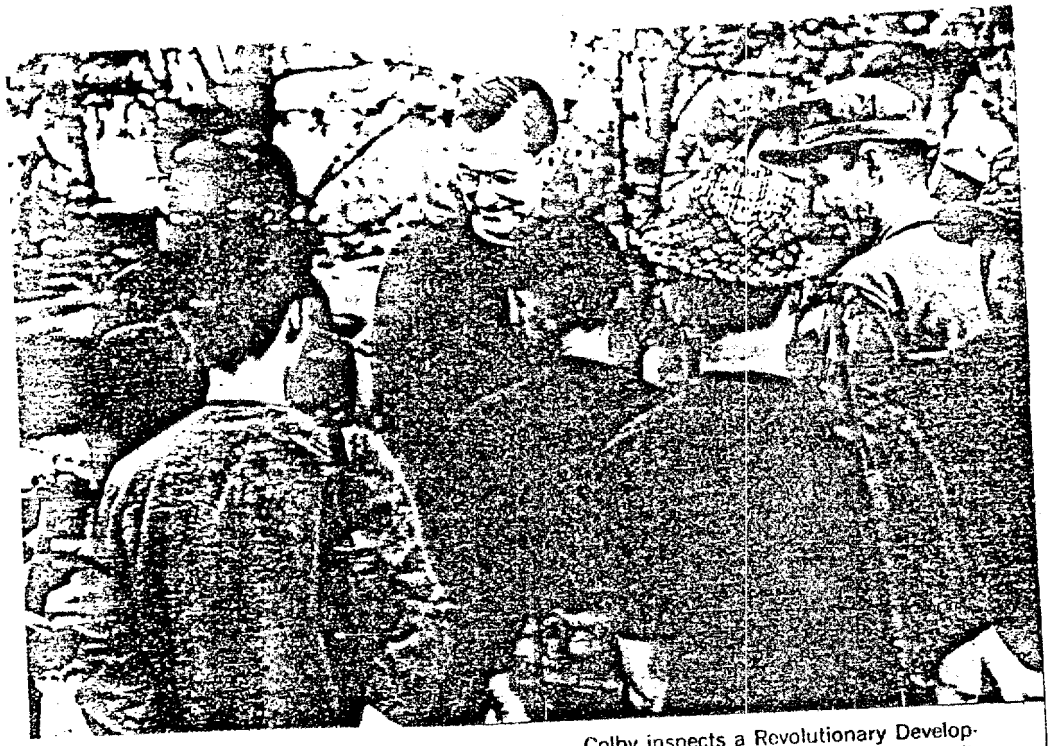
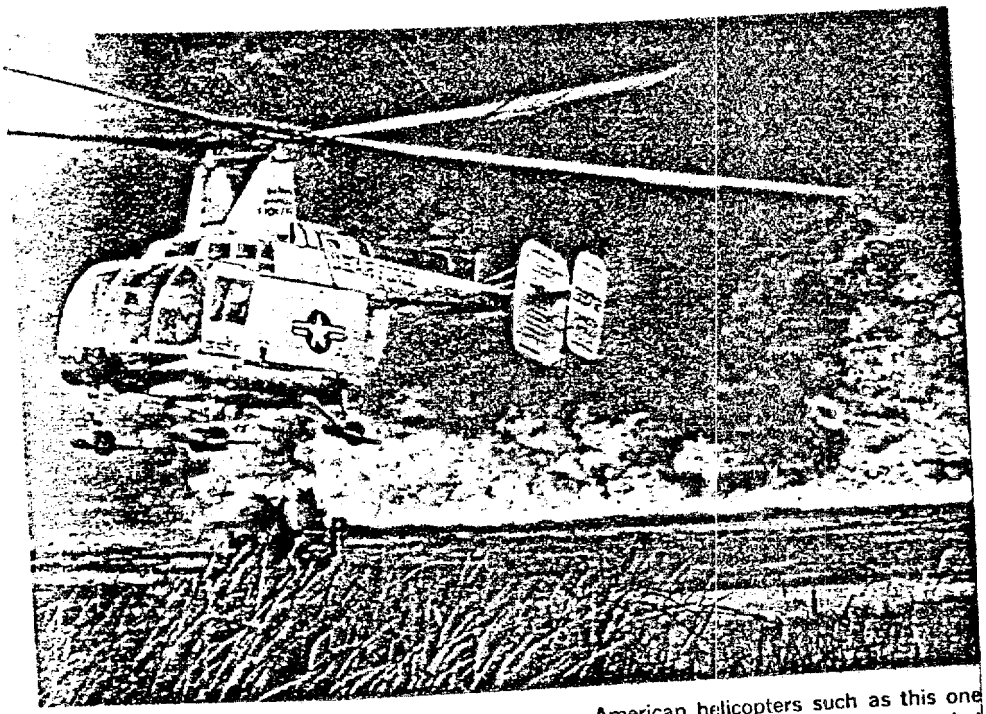


Colby inspects a Revolutionary Development Cadre team. The CIA provided villagers with weapons for their defense.



American helicopters such as this one were sent to Saigon to provide combat support for the South Vietnamese Army.

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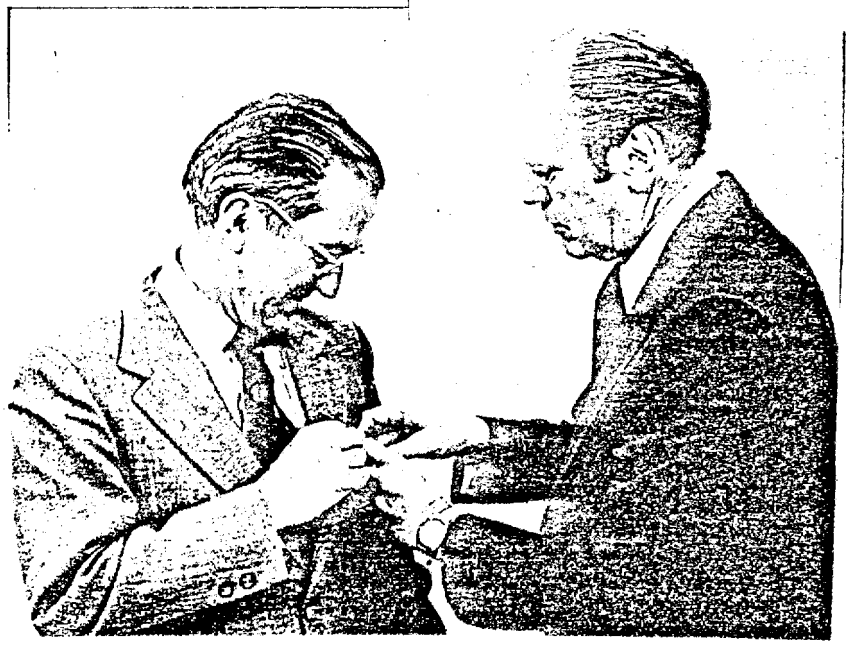
LBJ, with General Creighton Abrams, addresses troops in Vietnam. Johnson "inherited a mess in Vietnam," says Colby.

President Ford pins the National Security Medal on Colby in 1976. Colby was involved in Vietnam for almost 15 years.



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